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There was an era when Bengal was rich, her people relatively comfortable, and starvation infrequent rather than sustained. It was the era of the paddle steamer.

'Up the Brahmaputra with a Pair of Paddles'

P. J. English

WITH most people today in Bangladesh barely able to scratch out even the absolute minimum existence, the diverse subject of industrial history and its related archaeology summons little local interest. A pursuit, no doubt, for Western indulgence to while away idle time. Be that as it may, there was an era when Bengal was rich, her people relatively comfortable, and starvation infrequent rather than sustained. It was the era of the paddle steamer.

When India adjusted to East India Company (E.I.C.) hegemony — later a charge of the Crown — only the littoral from Bombay through to Chittagong was subjected to European contact before 1615. During that year it may be fair comment to state the first imported manufactured product penetrated inland. An English coach, shipped around the Cape of Good Hope to be presented by Sir Thomas Roe's embassy was, however, scorned by Emperor Jahangir as 'little and poor, not befitting a monarch until reconstructed, gilded, and decked out in silks'. Keen to oblige, the emperor subsequently sensed this mode of travel may see distances of upto forty miles or more covered in one day.

Apart from pots and pans, and the ubiquitous tall, slim, walnut clocks manufactured by Twittes of Manchester, 1740-1770, little change to Bengal society took place until the 1820's. Britain's inimitable Industrial Revolution was a force the East India company directors sagaciously adjudicated as the vehicle necessary for trade.

Consider the first iron bridge, erected in Shropshire, England, 1779. The eccentric — yet enlightened — Nawab of Oudh saw fit to contract Derbyshire's Butterley Company in 1815 to erect a 3-60 ft span across the Gumpul River at Lucknow complete with 14 gas lamps like you have with light in London. (How this distinguished nobleman expected to fire gas God only knows). However, a decade later 4 iron bridges were paving a way from Calcutta to Jessore. Modern communication was therefore born.

Railways, another great British invention, were first mooted in Bengal within a decade of the embryonic Liverpool-Manchester journey of 1825. Ironically, one Colonel Chesney during 1837-8 was actively engaged throughout Iraq devising routes utilizing steam boats along the Tigris and Euphrates, to establish a direct rail link from Manchester to Bengal. In fact, had the geography between the Balkans to Teheran fell under Union Jack benevolence, then Bengal would have anticipated American in the race for steam locomotion. But it was the paddle steamer that Bengal, with her Ganges and Brahmaputra Rivers, experienced the unique steam in motion long before the world's other great waterways relegated their watery ways.

William Symington, a carry Scot, is rightfully credited with placing the first steam engine in a vessel to propel two paddle wheels. The year was 1812. E.I.C. officials soon assessed the manifest benefits this 'new toy' could be adopted to enhance trade. After all, plying both the Ganges and Brahmaputra Rivers upstream was a different matter to coasting southwards into the Bay of Bengal.

During the period 1615-1750 the term 'factory' came to symbol any warehouse or emporium that bartered goods. Manufacturing, in modern parlance, was perhaps initiated with the casting of cannon near Calcutta, 1694, but was short lived. By 1800, with most vying European powers distanced by the new technology Carron (Falkirk) cannon, peace and trade brought stability to Bengal. The problem now facing E.I.C. directors was how to provide reliable transport into all parts of the Jewel which was fed by water finding a Bay of Bengal outlet. In 1820 this vexed issue was partially solved.

One of the first engines sited in Bengal was used to remove silted earth from the Hooghly River's bed. An eight horsepower engine brought out from the Boulton & Watt foundry at Birmingham, in 1817 or 1818, had done nothing but gather dust in a Calcutta godown (warehouse) until purchased by the E.I.C.'s government for use on a dredge. Hitched to a double set of revolving buckets mounted on a barge, the engine performed the humble duty of scooping mud from the river bottom to clear the way for Calcutta-bound conventional sailing vessels.

The first steamboat actually to carry passengers appeared on the scene in 1823 more by accident than by design. It happened that one of the E.I.C.'s merchants in China, whose health broke down before he could launch a steam-engine vessel on the Canton river, put up the parts for sale

were not strong enough to tow massive European sailing ships.

As receipts from carrying passengers did not cover expenses, the share-holders began to look for the first good opportunity to sell. Nevertheless, it was not long before other steam-driven paddle-

supplied from Butterley, as well as Maudslay of London.

The 1820's were likewise years when the prospect of shortening the four to six month voyage around the Cape of Good Hope, by adding steam engines and paddle-wheels to sailing vessels, began to excite merchant and shipping inter-

gations rising cause.

His proposal for an England to India steamer communication on the direct route through the Mediterranean, with an overland passage through Egypt, connecting at Suez with another steamer down the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean, was cold-shoul-

the first England-to-India steam voyage performed before the end of 1826, taking no more than seventy days and as many on the return.

A London financier, subsequently replaced by a group of stockholders, was first to act on the Bengal steam fund temptation. Gordon and Co.

fifteen feet in diameter. She was able to carry thirty-five days' fuel for seven furnaces consuming ten to twelve tons of English coal every twenty-four hours. When only loaded at two hundred or two hundred and fifty tons, drawing about twelve feet of water, her speed was six knots in

Between 1825-1828 weekly services were established and a year later a Maudslay engine steamer was 'cheered up the Karnaphuli'.

The Bengal government purchased the 'Diana', which was the first vessel to ply Brahmaputra waters, for Burmese service. It was found by experiment that the Brahmaputra River, like the great Ganges, is a seasonal river being very shallow during dry spells. Such rivers required boats with extremely light drafts, yet be capable of carrying cargoes with the least possible immersion. Four vessels were required and tenders for the engines were divided between Maudslay of London and Birmingham's Boulton and Watt.

The machinery arrived safely in Calcutta in forty-eight packing cases and the steamers 'Hoogly' and 'Berhampootee' were duly launched 1828. Capable of 50 hp, both vessels were frequently seen around Narayan-ganj and occasionally up the Meghna by 1832. They were able to move under steam a clear total of 240 hours at an average 3½ miles per hour. It was with distinct approval that 'Bengali merchants and gentle-folk alike' — having been isolated since time began — rendered gratitude to the repository of science and invention. By 1835 the benign London appointed governor of Bengal slashed fares by 50%. Such a benevolent act witnessed the paddle steamer loading passengers and freight as far afield as Sirajganj, Ashuganj and Kushtia. The once far distant towns and hamlets throughout Bengal soon became united.

Not unnaturally, the vessel owners began to seriously view fuel supplies with grave concern. Coal from Wales, Lancashire, and Newcastle was laboriously hauled by cumbersome sailing vessel to the now bustling port of Narayan-ganj. The search was on for indigenous supplies for wood, though plentiful, failed to contain the heat value hungry engines demanded. A team of British geologists were despatched by the Crown, their findings bringing tidings of great joy to those engaged in logistics when coal in abundant quantities was found in Bihar, Damodar, Assam and (later) Sylhet. Within a matter of months, industries were stimulated, adding impetus to the rising trade now placing Bengal on the international shipping lanes.

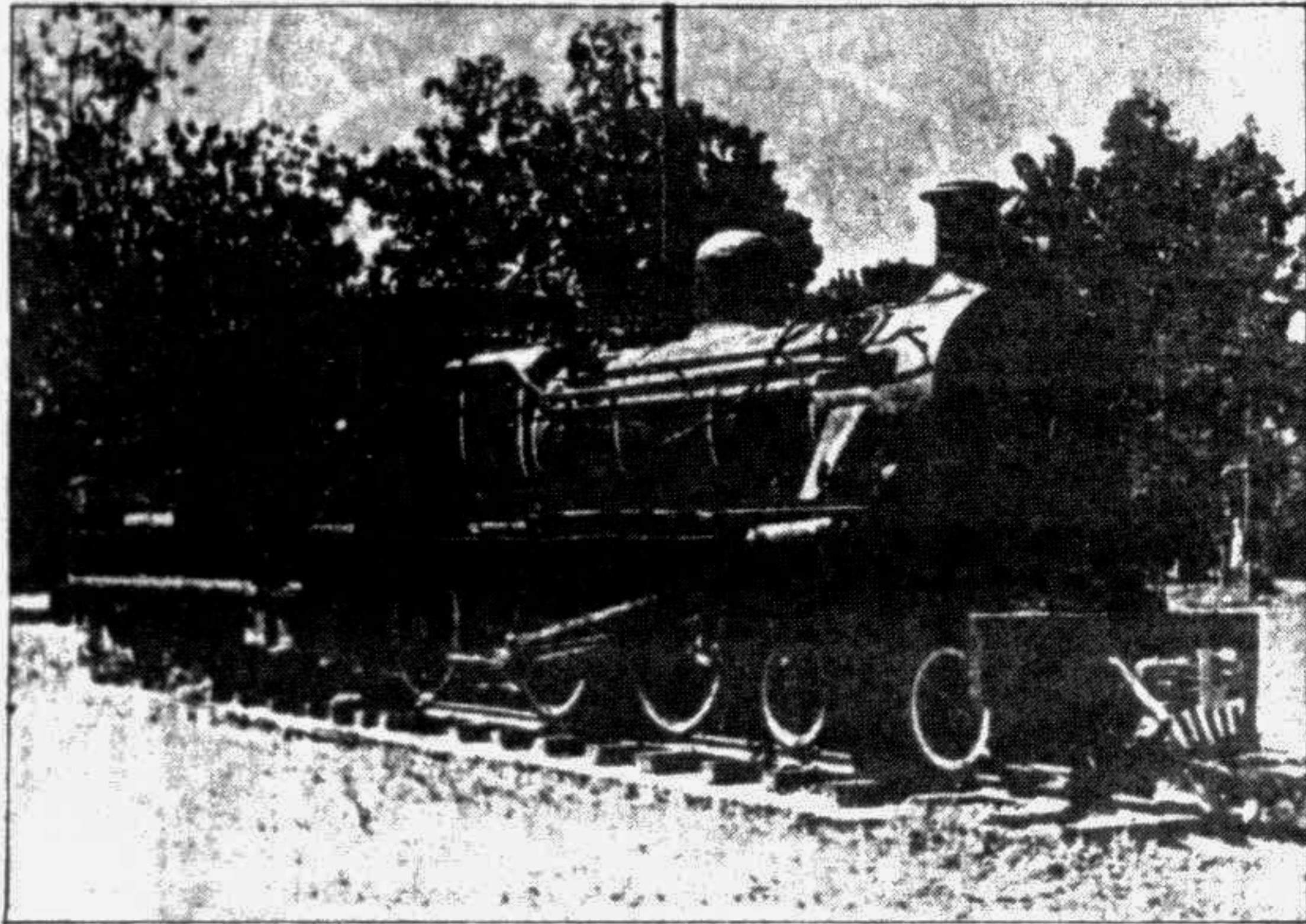
Glorious Link with the Greats

Now that England has at last conformed to John Donne's maximum about men and islands, one question of national dignity remains unanswered. Indeed, it has not even been asked. It is this: does the channel tunnel really stand in direct line of descent from Britain's great engineering feats of the past?

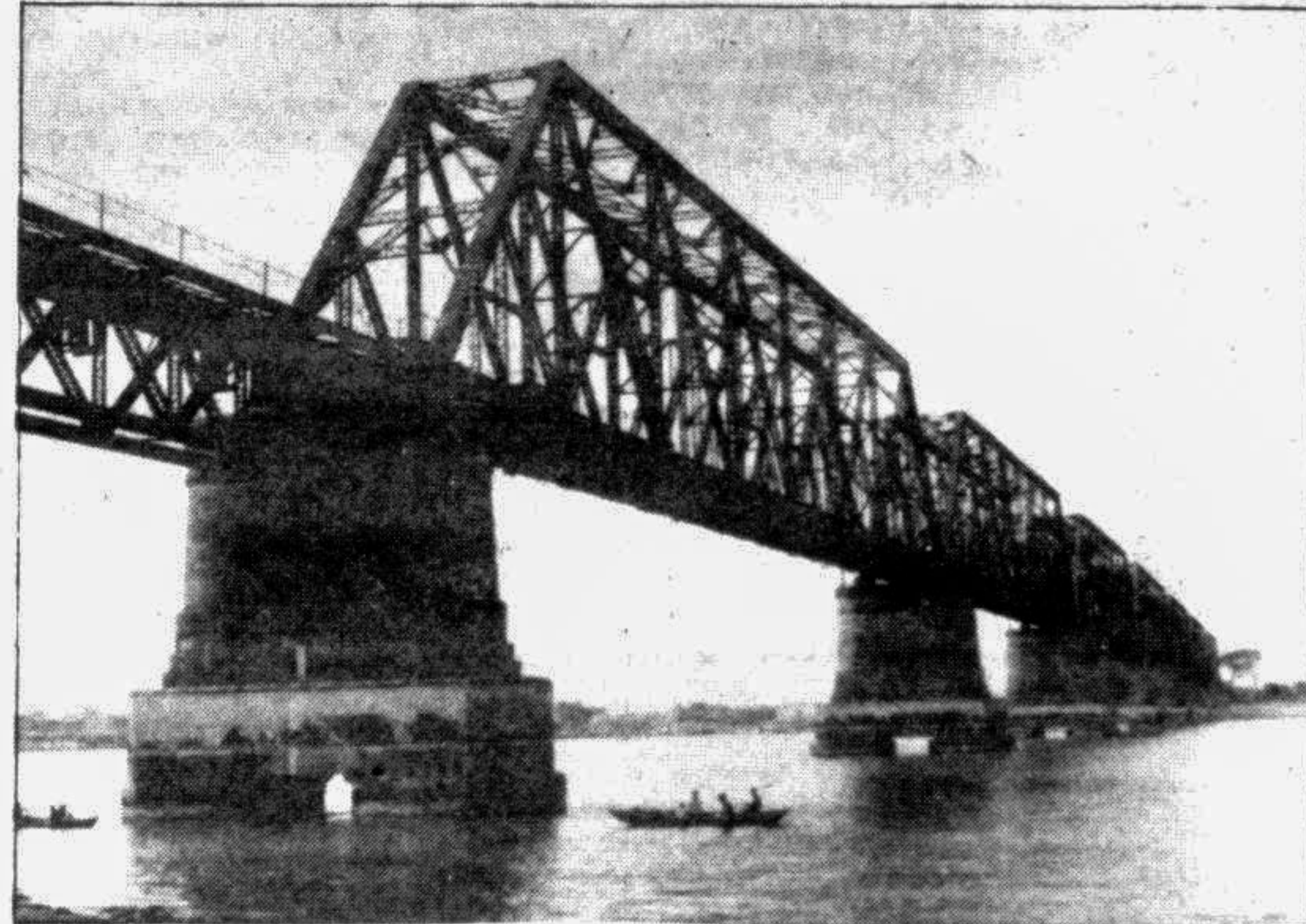
If the criterion is that all British projects of comparable ambition, especially those involving trains, must be stories of bankruptcy and tragedy before they bed down timelessly into the transport infrastructure then the tunnel, so far, fails to qualify. It is this very failure that should make us view Tuesday's twining of hands, or at least drill-heads, 120 feet beneath the Channel, as an unprecedented triumph.

True, the project has often seemed in danger of collapse as the costs have risen to Pound 7 billion from an original estimate of Pound 4.7 billion, and there is still no guarantee that it will not prove a bottomless pit for shareholders' and bankers' money; true, there have been seven deaths on the British side and two on the French; and true, there is the small matter of Kent and the high-speed link. But if the present work can be considered as a discrete operation, rather than as part of a continuum originating in the dreams of the French mining engineer Albert Mathieu 188 years ago, the tunnel has been remarkably light on headaches.

The fact is that major works have come in over budget since Stonehenge, and in those days they could not even make a scapegoat of labour costs. Take Brunel's historic suspension bridge at Clifton, 'my first child, my darling', postponed time after time as the costs soared and the Clifton Bridge Company sought yet more money from the shareholders; or the Forth Bridge, where of the 5,000 construction workers (2,000 fewer than the British number), 57 were killed and about 500 injured.



Preserved at the Boy Scouts' Park at Mouchak, Gazipur, this 4-6-0 1909 Sir W.G. Armstrong loco with nearly a million miles clocked, was the pride of the Assam Bengal Railway Co.



British designed and built — a great link with the past. King George VI Bridge constructed by Brathwaite, Jessops and Burns on the Meghna River (1936-37).

at Calcutta. Government declined his tender, but a group of merchants took up the venture, distributing shares among the principal agency houses.

The contract for a wooden hull to receive the engines was let to Calcutta's premier builders of European-designed ships. In July 1823, Messrs Kyd and Co. launched their first steamer, the 'Diana'. She proved an extremely useful vessel in the harbour, taking on passengers in all weathers, tides, and currents. Bengalis crowded both river banks to witness her surprising manoeuvres. She was once noted chugging around the Sundarbans, being the first vessel to enter Eastern Bengal (Bangladesh). However, her two engines with only thirty-two combined horsepower,

wheelers — the 'Forbes', the 'Telica', the 'Comet', and the 'Firefly' — were operating successfully as tugs on the Calcutta waterfront, with engines

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ests both in India and England. In 1822, a meeting was held in London to found a General Steam Navigation Company. One of the most active on its provisional committee was a veteran sea captain who championed the shorter Suez route as an alternative to the long voyage around Africa. James Henry Johnston, (1787-1851), had entered the Royal Navy in 1803, fought Napoleon at Trafalgar, and held a lieutenant's commission on ships that saw action along the Italian coast, until a wound invalidated him in 1810. Placed on half-pay at the close of the wars, like so many others, he set out to mend his fortunes in the East. From Calcutta he captained two voyages of a merchant sailing ship, but returned to England in 1821 to devote himself to steam navi-

gated by the General Steam Navigation Company. However, a number of influential businessmen promised backing if he could win the support of their friends in Bengal. By this time Narayan-ganj and Chittagong were centres of expanding trade. So, with the object of raising capital for the purchase of a relay of steamers, Johnston once more journeyed out to Calcutta.

He arrived at a most inopportune time. The mercantile community was still suffering from the disillusionment caused by the recent failure of the 'Diana' as a commercial speculation. The Calcutta merchants in 1823 were willing to do no more than pass resolutions at the town hall, inviting subscriptions to a Rs 100,000 fund (nearly Rs 70,000 was eventually collected) to reward

and Messrs. Maudslay and Field built a one hundred and forty-one foot, wooden-hulled, lugger-rigged sailing vessel, equipped with a copper boiler and a pair of sixty horsepower engines to drive paddle-wheels

In 1850 Brunel secured his first Indian contract for iron railway fixings for a line between Calcutta and Dhaka. The East Bengal Railway was therefore given birth. Accompanying Brunel were Britain's finest bridge builders... and in 1859 an 1860 ft. iron bridge allowed rails to penetrate into Darshana and Kushtia.

favourable weather.

Launched in February 1825, the paddle steamer 'Enterprise' was destined to be the first steam-aided sailing ship to round the Cape. She was put under the command of Captain Johnston, who had prudently agreed to the Cape route after his unsuccessful attempt to get financial backing for his own preferred course via Suez. Safely arriving in Bengal, a new chapter in world maritime history commenced.

By 1826 numerous engines were arriving from England on sailing ships, with the intention that wooden hulls should be built throughout Bengal. Local enterprise apparently rose to the occasion. Marine industries were established at Khulna, Patuakhali, Narayan-ganj and Chittagong.

About Visitors, Standards and Values

FOR a change, let's leave the past where it belongs. No more nostalgia, for this week anyway. So, instead of sweetness and light which filled my recollections of people like Abdus Salam, Abu Sayeed Ayyub and A. M. O. Ghani, we will be looking at present-day realities, often unattractive and sometimes harsh, which this writer has been trying to come to terms with.

In the process, I have been puzzled and bewildered, sad and angry, passive and indifferent. Behind these varied reactions lie impressions and encounters, including some unexpected ones.

Let's start with my favourite one. Just about two years ago, I was in my make-shift office of a local newspaper which, at a moment of infinite wisdom or utter thoughtlessness, depending on one's perspective, had just hired me as its editor. The office I then occupied temporarily, like the job itself, was a library full of law journals whose old ancient look was somewhat symbolic of the institution that was partly responsible for my return home.

standing since I had not yet offered him a chair.

"I am a Bangladeshi journalist working in Canada. I have brought you an article for publication," he said and handed to me a thick envelope.

"May I ask you a question?" I queried in a voice that was deliberately humble and soft.

"Please go ahead, Sir," the young man said encouragingly and sat down on the chair facing me.

"Young man, please tell me, would you be able to see a

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newspaper editor in Canada without an appointment? I asked in a voice that was sharp and firm, no longer humble and soft.

While my visitor muttered a reply, I asked him if editors in Bangladesh and Canada should be treated differently. "Why should we apply different standards?"

The end of the meeting? Not really. The young man offered to come back another day after phoning me for an appointment. No, that was not necessary. We chatted for a while and we parted as friends. As he walked out of the room, I noticed that his steps were now slow and steady, no longer jaunty and brisk.

SOMETIMES, it can be the other way round, that is, it is the visitor who may regard the meeting as something of an ordeal certainly less than a pleasant experience.

Here's something I recently heard from a Bangladeshi official who, once a Secretary of a Ministry here, is now working for an international organisation in Kuala Lumpur.

"My first meeting with a Malaysian official whom I met on appointment was a good, pleasant, learning experience," he said. "I was with him for some 20 minutes. During this relatively short meeting, short by Dhaka standards, there

official at the Central Secretariat?"

"During my office hours, I normally had three types of visitors, friends and close colleagues who would drop in for a chat and some tea; occasional foreign experts who would be treated carefully and shown a lot of consideration; and others who would be waiting in the room of my personal assistant for hours, seemingly with limitless patience, chatting among themselves, smoking and sipping tea."

"Unless I was with a foreign guest, I was never quite alone with a visitor. There would be phone calls and people would

uncomfortable, the Minister suggested that I should come over to his residence for tea the same evening. "We will have a good chat," he said cheerfully.

I came over to his residence. We did indeed have a good chat. While we sipped tea, the Minister talked for one whole hour, non-stop, without even a pause, mostly about his work. I listened without asking a single question. As I left his place, he thanked me profusely for "our

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good chat."

Now, when a politician, high official or a public figure says, "Come home for a chat," I take it to mean, "Come home when I will talk and you will listen."

To what do we attribute this passion for talking? Maybe we are basically an articulate people, to put it nicely, or just garrulous, to put it less nicely, constantly promoting what a colleague describes as our 'vocal culture.' It has probably something to do with our high rate of illiteracy, which makes it necessary for us, especially the politicians, to talk rather than to write, to repeat a point again and again (to make it

sound convincing), to speak in a particularly loud voice (a habit acquired by politicians in total disregard of the use of microphone) and, at closed door meetings, to remain on the offensive in dealing with any viewpoint that may not come from "your own side" (whatever that side may be).

As a friend here once put it, "In our country, moderation indicates weakness, while in other cultures, it may be a sign of reasonableness."

DO we see some signs of changes?

At a drug store at Gulshan, a sign on the wall says, "Please do not talk in a loud voice."

In the waiting room at a medical clinic on the Elephant Road, about ten instructions are painted on a board. They include several obvious ones as "Do not spit" and "Please wait for your turn to see the doctor."

But the last one on the list is something different. "If you are too poor to pay for your treatment, please let us know in advance." I am assured that the clinic never turns away a poor non-paying patient.

At the Delta Medical Centre — to give credit where it is due — all visitors are required to take off their shoes at the entrance and to put on slipper provided by the clinic to keep the rooms as dust-free as possible.

So, at some levels, efforts are on to raise the level of the quality of our life. It is certainly welcome for a start.

MY WORLD

S. M. Ali

were no phone calls, no interruptions, no other visitors. A tea tray was already there when I had arrived. While we sipped tea, the official listened to me with total, undivided attention, as if for him, this was the most important meeting of the day, and he made notes. From time to time, he asked questions and sought clarifications, which helped to put our discussion in a positive perspective. He made me forget that I sought a favour for my organisation. He placed me at ease. When the discussion was over, he set the date for a follow-up meeting, came up to the door to see me off and then his secretary accompanied me to my car which was parked at the main entrance.

How did it compare with his own treatment of visitors back home when he was a high